Women's Work
Christine Bisetto and Helen Altman overcome the trappings of gender to tackle bigger issues
By Bret McCabe

A little over a decade ago, the economic and conservative malaise of the 1980s threatened to push into a new decade's dawn, the 1990s. Nobody was quite sure what the '90s held in store, but underneath the curiosity was a thin layer of hope. To many people, the '80s felt so heavy and leaden that life couldn't sink much lower.

Even the humanities weathered the storm badly. Throughout the '80s, critics of all stripes proclaimed and/or foresaw not only the imminent demise of intellectual activity but its extinction altogether. Philosophy? Dead. Literature? Dead. Painting? Dead. And by the decade's close, some critics had gone so far as to commit professional suicide, sending theory and criticism to the morgue.

That death trip was, of course, metaphorical in nature. But the sentiment was still felt. They'd run out of ideas. They'd exhausted themselves. So much so that when the times started a-changing and the economy started to look up rather than down, just about any idea would do, permitting the united colors of multiculturalism to sweep into the academy and turn it into a Benetton marketplace.

The wild child through this rocking-horse ride was feminism. Long thought impervious to outside criticism—if only because it was so used to fighting for its very survival—the old guard of feminism was swallowed up by the vast sea of identity politics, leaving the bombast of feminist theory feeling like the mouse that roared.

But contexts change as often as the times, and nowhere is that more apparent than in the artworks of Christine Bisetto and Helen Altman. Fifteen years ago, their choice of materials and media would brand them "women artists" in the most condescending manner. Their work would be seen as a push both to reassess the value of traditional gender roles and erode the cultural connotations of those practices that are defined as feminine. Today, however, their works read less with the underpinnings of feminist discourse than the rumblings of aesthetic restlessness.
Altman's solo show *My Best Eggs*, on view at Dunn and Brown Contemporary, feels the most strident at first. In keeping with a recent turn in her work, Altman displays a series of large, quilted blankets. These pieces are formed from various colored and patterned fabrics and incorporate an image that is printed onto the fabric with an inkjet printer. Her images are of natural phenomena--trees, water, animals--and often exude the disciplined demeanor of photographs from a natural history textbook.

The obvious precursor to Altman's blankets is Robert Rauschenberg's "Bed" from 1955, whereby the jolly artist vertically installed his sleeping space, bedding and all, as a piece. Altman isn't as interested in the found-object aspect, though her approach could be called Rauschenbergian. Altman's are works that straddle the lines separating the sculptural from the painterly, and her "canvases" are organized with the color considerations and compositional acumen of collage.

Altman's added flourish is the use of fabric for both its flatness--it can hang like a painting--and texture. Her blankets are objects you want to touch. Unfortunately, Altman's ideas read better on paper than they do in person. The combinations of ideas in her blanket-canvases simply don't add up to create a vibrancy of their own. For "Colorado Blue Spruce," the inkjet image of the title sits in the center of a bright blue, lime green and electric yellow floral print that looks like fabric for a Betsey Johnson mini-dress circa 1966. It sounds like a wild idea, but the piece itself is solemnly inert. The same goes for "Ocean Blanket," a quilted square composed of three fabric panels--an image of ocean waves in the upper left third, a green panel in the bottom left third and a gray panel running down the right third--all encompassed by a navy blue trim. There's nothing wrong with the imagery, the choice of materials, the composition or the palette. The arrangement is perfectly content. Maybe that's why it feels so benign--there's nothing creating any tension to grab you.

And you can't go blaming this lack of a compelling visual spark on her choice of subject matter, either. Altman's interest in the natural world, in particular the animal kingdom, is also seen in her "torch drawings," a process in which Altman soaks heavy-stock paper in water and then singes it with a torch, making the resultant image part of the paper itself. The virtuosity of her technique is indeed impressive; the drawings have the gentle variations in tonality of pencil but the flat surface of a print. There's nothing out of the ordinary about the subject matter in and of itself, even in the context of her blanket pieces. But they have a vitality and dynamism that the blankets lack.

Altman's process gets its most thorough yet anticlimactic workout in "Stand," a series of slipcovers installed over eight chairs. On the back of the slipcovers is an image of zebras at a watering hole, the chairs are spaced apart, but you get the idea if you pushed them together the eight tall, rectangular images would form one wide, rectangular image. But what of it? Sure, Altman is slicing an image into parts and disrupting its continuity, but you're left wondering what sort of stand she's taking by putting them on the backs of chairs. "Stand" feels less like a rigorous mental workout than a Ralph Lauren design for a Weir's dining set.

It's Altman's use of large scale that amplifies the shakier territory in her work. But if the grandness of Altman's vision is her biggest hurdle, the relative smallness of Bisetto's works the opposite way. For *Ace* at the Mulcahy Modern Gallery, Bisetto displays 13 pieces that all use items associated with home life, domesticity or materials of "crafts." For her "dot series," Bisetto takes the small pieces of paper discarded from a paper hole-puncher and adheres them to the sticky side of transparent tape. Her "string series" uses latex-paint-covered hole punches that she stitches together in a series along a thread, much like a popcorn garland or a candy necklace. Throughout, her overall color palette favors the pastel.

But the very quaintness of the work disarms you. It's difficult to tell what sort of work Bisetto has crafted. Part painting, part sculpture, part multimedia.
construction, Bisetto has intimately fashioned objects that defy conventions. "Eggplant" uses old library card-catalog cards dipped in deep purple latex and stacked in a precarious, oblong structure that has the off-balance form of an aubergine. "Boxed"—plastic boxes filled with dried watercolor paint—has the ordered arrangement and chromatic softness of a Clinique cosmetic display but is articulated in a manner that begs you to consider its meaning while remaining elusive. And the tape and colored hole-punch constructions couldn't be more fey if they were paper hats, yet have the eerie, organic imbroglio of wasp's nests or dusty cobwebs. They're curious to look at, but you don't want to get too close.

To her credit, Bisetto recognizes that her histrionics are best served by these smaller objects. Admittedly, it could be their very intimacy that catches you off guard and compels you to read more into them—we tend not to expect much from objects so slight. But it's better than the alternative. As we pass the two-thirds mark into this first year of the new millennium, cultural life feels as though it's teetering on a precipice just as wide as the one that kicked off the '90s, if not more so. But thanks to minds not tainted or hung up on the culture wars of yore, fresher takes on the dilemmas of art and ideas are being forged, some persuasive, some less so. And if Christine Bisetto and Helen Altman have attained only modest success here, at least it's a sign that minds are taking an active role in determining what direction we're moving in, rather than merely waiting for the other shoe to drop.

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